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**Title:** The Role of Religion in the Lives of Hindu Students

**Course:** AAS346 Section A(Asian American Youth) Fall 2007 -- Soo Ah Kwon

**About the Author:** My research was conducted as a freshman in my first semester here at the University of Illinois. Personally, I am a Christian but I myself tried to keep the most objective point of view during my research. I chose to study Hindu students because Hinduism is a very widely known religion yet it is not a dominant religion on the UIUC campus. I find the religion interesting and a topic worth studying.

**Keywords:** Religion, Hinduism, U of I, Conversion

**Abstract:** The main focus of doing a research project like this is to find out the impact of religion in the lives of students at the University of Illinois. In order to specify the research project, the research was done on Hindu students and the research sought to answer the question as to why some students convert to different religions. Through an interview process with several students, it seemed as though the students who were held more responsible for their faith ended up having a stronger faith, whereas the students who were given more freedom were likely to convert.

**Question:** Early Question  
September 19, 2007

Growing up in a predominantly Protestant background, I am interested to see how religion, especially the ones different from my own, affect the Asian American student body here at the University of Illinois. I wonder to what extent does faith play a role into everyday living in the lives of Asian Americans. Do students feel bound by the restriction of their religion or do they feel a sense of unexplainable liberation? Do the students that are atheists or agnostics pity zealous believers or do they respect the discipline involved in each distinct religion? To sum up all the questions, just how much is religion a part of the Asian American student body here at the University of Illinois and how does it affect their social, academic, and emotional well-being?

Revised Question: I am refining my question and exclusively looking at the religious beliefs/practices of Indian and Pakistani students here on campus. I am interested to see if they continue the religious practices that they were brought up in, if they have changed their religious beliefs here on campus, and how this effects their life. I know how one thing effects one's life is a bit broad but I am interested to discover their

overall feeling of their religious practices. In addition to this, I am particularly interested in finding students who have converted to different religions and why they did.

**Plan:** Initial Plan - 10.3.07 In order to research my topic, I will interview as many Indian and Pakistani students that will volunteer. Hopefully the interviews will last anywhere from about 20-40 minutes. I will ask them in-depth questions of their religious background in terms of which religion they were brought up in. I will also ask questions of how often they practice their religion and how strongly they hold to their beliefs. Prior to any interviews I want to see if any previous research has been done on Indian and Pakistani students their religious practices. Also, it would be interesting to see what is the "mainstream" religions and beliefs among the two ethnicities.

**Data  
(observation):**

**Data** Interview 1 - 10/24/07  
**(interview):** My first interview was with a female student Rachel (pseudonym) at the UIUC who has been a Hindu all of her life. I realized through this interview that I lacked a lot of information about Hinduism and that I was very ignorant towards the religion.

The interview started out with a very general and broad look at Hinduism. However, the religion's many layers and different groups make it hard to pinpoint the practices of the majority of Hindus. At the very beginning of the interview, Rachel first explained that she was from a very small community of Hindus "that even other Indian people don't know about" called Coorg (Kodava is the Indian equivalent). So coming from a minority group of Indians, the practices would be undoubtedly different from each other. Rachel then described that personally it's like a "mishmash" where older, ancient customs are fused with newer Hindu practices. I was always under the impression that all Hindus were vegetarian. However, Rachel told me that Coorgs are not vegetarians. She also went on to tell me that most Hindu followers, including her, do not feel it is necessary to attend temple and follow the rituals every single week because you can pray anywhere. She also included that it is very common to have a closet-like shrine set up in the house and at times, the richer Hindu families will devote an entire room to be a shrine. Rachel's family has a shrine in their house.

Some other important general information Rachel included about the Hindu religion was that there is a sacred piece of literature similar to the Christian Bible or the Jewish Torah called the Vedas. In addition to that, the widely known Kama Sutra, a book about love that includes a portion on sex, could also be considered sacred literature. The main purpose

of following Hinduism is to lead good, moral lives to reincarnate into higher beings so that one day a Hindu can reach heaven and become a deva himself/herself.

The most intriguing part of the interview was when Rachel lived on campus as a Hindu. It was already established that it wasn't necessary to attend temple every day or every week. However, prior to the interview, I discovered that there was no Hindu temple on campus. When I asked Rachel where the nearest temple was, she answered and said it was at least 30 minutes away. However, I discovered that even if there were a Hindu temple on campus, she probably would not go, except possibly for the festival days. The Hindu Student Council on campus will sometimes rent out a building on campus and have a puja (religious ritual). When I expressed my sympathy to Rachel for the absence of a temple with a closer proximity to campus, she replied, "I don't see myself going to temple with my friends; that's something I do with my family... In terms of actual, personal, spiritual identity, they don't need that."

When bringing up the topic of conversion, she told me that she herself does not think of it as a big deal if she were to convert to a different religion. Rachel explained that if she were to convert, her parents would not be upset or disown her, they would simply be curious. Considering this, it begs the question: How is it that some Hindu students on campus, with no relatively close temple to go to and with rare attendance at a temple, still connect and identify with their Hindu background, whereas other Hindu students will either turn to atheism, agnosticism, or other religions. Are the Hindu students that still follow Hinduism more resilient in their faith or were the former Hindu followers just experimenting or were they forced to do something they didn't want to when they were growing up, bringing about a negative experience in them?

#### Interview #2 - 11/22/07

My second interview was with a freshman Hindu male, Peter (pseudonym). The interview gave additional background information about Hinduism and also a different point of view from the previous interview with Rachel. Peter is in a major, perhaps sect, for a lack of a better word, which is different from Rachel's. Hinduism seems to vary from state to state in India and Peter's family is from a major state Gujarati. It might be appropriate to call his sect the "mainstream Hinduism". It seems to be one of the most, if not the most, dominant group of Hindus from India.

In terms of practices, Peter is a vegetarian, prays numerous times a day, and attends temple whenever he is home with his family. He told

me that fasting among his sect is done more often among women. He himself has never fasted before, not because he lacks religious conviction, but he simply feels no desire to do so. To be clear, men also do fast but it seems that women do it much more frequently. When I asked Peter about his rationale for being a vegetarian, he said that since God is omnipresent he is present in both animate and inanimate objects such as animals. So in a way, it would be almost disrespectful to eat animals, especially if you can just live as a vegetarian.

An interesting point that was brought up by Peter was that he felt some distance in Hinduism because of the language barrier. Since much of the practices are in either an Indian dialect or Sanskrit, it is hard to understand things such as prayers, songs, and religious writings. It is interesting because this point is brought up in not only Peter's interview but many other interviews as well.

Many other common themes that came up in the interviews were the fact that Hinduism is purely a personal religion. There's no equivalent of a church service of Christianity in Hinduism, so it is even more motivating for Hindus to be held accountable for themselves. The Hindu students were very adamant in relaying the message that prayer is something that can be done anywhere. For them, religion is not excluded solely to a building but is something to carry with you every day. In addition to that, the students said that whether you are a Christian, Jew, Muslim, or any other religion, you are still considered a Hindu in Hinduism. Since there are so many different forms of the main god, everyone is the same in Hinduism because every person trying to get into heaven among all the religions is essentially trying to reach the same place as everybody else.

As the interview came to a close, my main focus came out into the open and I asked Peter if he sees more Hindu students falling away or moving closer to their religion. Peter gave a mixed answer saying that he saw both people falling away and getting closer to Hinduism. From a very personal experience, he's seen students become closer through their social networking of other Hindu students. Also, he's seen students lose some of their faith like his older brother and his friend who gave up vegetarianism because it was inconvenient due to the selections offered in the cafeteria. However, overall, Peter came to the conclusion that he's seen more students distance themselves from their Hindu faith more often than not.

Interview #3 - 11/23/07

My third interview was with Hanna (pseudonym), a senior at the U of I who is very involved with RSOs on campus. Hannah's case is very special because she was raised in a Hindu environment yet attended

church for two years, which is a very significant amount of time. Hannah ended up returning to her spiritual roots (Hinduism) after a negative experience in a Christian church in college. She attended both a Lutheran and Catholic church.

The main reason she began to attend Christian churches is a result of a high school teacher's encouragement to try out new things. Hanna said that her teacher told her and the other students to put themselves in a completely foreign environment and to see how it goes. Hannah said that she's always been a spiritual person and that since her boyfriend in high school was a Christian, she wanted to go to a Christian church. Despite Hanna's boyfriend's hypocritical lifestyle, Hanna was still interested in the Christian religion and continued to attend even after her breakup. Hanna attended a Lutheran church on campus consistently for two years. She stated that the pastor and the church environment was very friendly and that it was very enjoyable. However, the church's stance on homosexuality was very disturbing to her. She added that Hinduism was very general in its teaching (e.g., loving everybody, to live moral lives) whereas the church's stance on homosexuality seemed to be very exclusive and cold. After hearing about the church's exclusive language, Hanna ceased to attend any Christian church thereafter.

Hanna now identifies with Hinduism more than anything, especially now that her current boyfriend is very passionate about Hinduism. She said she is able to learn more about Hinduism than before and that she is very interested now that she is a way of understanding it clearly. As mentioned in earlier interviews, many aspects of the Hindu religion are hard to understand because of the language they are interpreted in (Gujarati or Sanskrit). A major component of Hanna's interest in Christianity was its simplicity and that it was easy to understand the language the services were held in (English).

When I mentioned that no Hindu temple had a close proximity to campus, she said that it would make no major difference on the Hindu student body at the university. She explained that Hinduism is not avid on converting people from other religions to Hinduism. Therefore, even if there was a Hindu temple on campus, there would be no significant increase in the amount of Hindu students on campus.

**Analysis:** October 31, 2007

The data I have collected thus far has led me to new insights and intriguing questions. One of these insights is that, considering my data so far, places of worship become very much like a social medium in terms of meeting new people and being connected to a social network of a specific group (e.g., Indian Hindus). I believe that unless the

parents of a Hindu college student emphasize the practices of Hinduism on their child at an earlier age, then they will find other ways of discovering a group of other Indians, whether it be partying with other Indians or joining an Indian organization.

The data I received so far indicates that the ritualistic practices of Hinduism seem like a very traditional activity. Hindu students will try and live out the basic foundations of Hinduism like following the Golden Rule and being the best moral person they can be. The incentive to go to temple every week is absent because most Hindus believe that they can sustain their faith through their everyday lives. The incentive is also absent if they either do not meet or talk to people at temple or if the people they see at temple are at an arm's length away. The first interviewee reiterated that for her, temple is a place to go with her family. She will sometimes go alone if she feels the need to but for the most part, it would be very strange to go with her Hindu friends.

In the article "Nostalgia", Sunaina Maira (2002) describes the trend of Second-Generation Indians to live a shadow life that is in contrast to the traditional, moral, religious life they live in front of their parents. It is normal for them to go to parties and to detach themselves from the conservative environment set in their homes.

To complement the idea of the social aspect of Hinduism is the article "Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)". In this article Sunaina Maira (1999) describes two sides of a coin among Second-Generation Desi Youth. The article states, "Although most men observe that the demure, feminized image is considered more appropriate for Indian American women than hip-hop style, modest femininity in turn is passed over at parties for women who perform a more sexualized style on the dance floor" (Maira, 1999). Although the quote is directed towards women, it can also include men that the formal look for Indian men is to look more conservative, rather than the tight, preppy clothes displayed on your everyday average fratboy. The point I want to emphasize is not the style or fashion among these Indian youth, but rather the stark contrast in the image held of Indians. I believe that unless Indian students find solidarity among Hindus or Christians or any other religion, then they will turn to a different common ground.

In the minds of most youth today, both Asian and non-Asian, a religious gathering would not be the first place to come to mind if they were looking for a good time. So, the fact that most Hindu students are looking to a social outlet that differs from the social networking found in a Hindu temple is supported by the ideas in the Maira pieces, that students are looking to emerge from the traditional, conservative ways

of socializing that are characteristic of Hindu practices. However, from one particular interview, a student said that she is friends with some diehard Hindus. These Hindus are very gung ho about practices and focus much on Hinduism in their daily lives. The interviewee explained that these Hindu students who are Indian, associate with strictly other Indian Hindus and go to temple with other Indian Hindus.

In the article "Second-Generation Korean American Evangelicals: Ethnic, Multiethnic, or White Campus Ministries?" the author Rebecca Yim (2004) explains that minority college students will, more often than not, attend places of worship with congregations that are ethnically similar. So the fact that some Indian Hindus go to temple that are made up of Indian Hindus is a widely-known phenomenon.

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**Research Proposal:** My main concern and question in doing a research project is to investigate how significant religion is in the lives of students on campus. I realize that studying religion in general is very broad so I want to narrow it down to Hindu students on campus. I am curious to find out if Hindu students habitually pray, fast, attend temple, etc. and how often. I want to see how the Hindu student body at the University of Illinois stays with their spirituality or what happens when they fall away. What is the main motivation of the continuation of a religion or what makes some students want to stop?

Furthermore, I want to study why people convert to a religion different from their parents. To research spiritual motivation more clearly, it would be helpful to talk to Hindu students that have converted into another religion, namely Christianity. Do Hindu students feel more free to broaden their horizons because their Hindu parents encouraged them to take their own paths or is it a result of a strict upbringing where the students were not allowed to "try out" new things, such as a different religion. Overall, how does this all affect the lifestyle of a religious student on the U of I campus.

Rebecca Yim (2004), the author of "Second Generation Korean American Evangelicals: Ethnic, Multiethnic, or White Campus Ministries?", writes about how there is an attendance explosion among Korean churches on campuses across the nation. She writes about how many Korean American students end up attending churches that are ethnically similar. This article sparks many questions revolving around religion and is the basic inspiration for this research project. One of these questions is, "To what extent the continuation or the arrival to any religious gathering due to religion conviction versus social networking?"

The same question (religion conviction vs. social networking) comes up in the articles "Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)" and "Nostalgia", Sunaina Maira (1999, 2002), writes of the dual lifestyle of young Indian Americans. The identity they display for their parents is a complete paradox to that of the party scene. These Indian American youth put on a very conservative lifestyle at home; a lifestyle of studying, passiveness, and morality. However, when these students go out to the clubs their entire personas seem to change to the spontaneous and wild personalities that their parents have been taught to discourage. I believe that this change is thought to be necessary by these students to find a social outlet and a way of gathering in a place that connects with their ethnic roots. This article pertains to religion because I believe many find church or temple or etc. to be the same kind of social outlet that the clubs are to the Indian American youth mentioned in the article. I believe students continue to go to religious gatherings to be "fed" not only spiritually, but also socially.

A previous EUI project that seemed to support my hypothesis of students attending religious gatherings for social, as well as religious purposes, was "The Importance of Christianity and Christian Registered Student Organizations at Illinois State University" conducted by Jakob Sedig. In this project the student researcher studies the different Christian organizations on his campus. He attends many events and interviews a good number of students to investigate the reason for the rise in numbers among Christian RSOs on his campus. At the end of his research, he discovers that most, if not all, students come for God, but stay for the people.

In order to study the role of religion in students' lives here at the U of I, I will interview Hindu students or Christian students who were Hindu. Some of the main aspects I wish to study are how much the students identify/identified with Hinduism, meaning how often do they attend temple, practice rituals, pray, etc., how much their parents identify with Hinduism, how strict their parents are concerning other religions, if they



have (had) a lot of friends among Hinduism, and for those who have converted, what was the main reason for converting to a different religion.

Although I have not interviewed as many people as I would have liked, I have discovered some common themes among the interviews thus far.

First of all, all three students regularly attended a Hindu temple during high school and continue to do so whenever they are home. When I brought up the fact that there is no Hindu temple with a close proximity to campus, it did not seem to matter to them. The students explained how a religious gathering is not necessary to sustain their faith because they could pray wherever and whenever. The students went so far as to say that it would hardly make any difference having a Hindu temple closer to campus. The only difference that could be imaginable is the increase of awareness of Hindus on campus. However, some of the students regularly attend a meeting once a week on Sundays that deals with Hinduism. While the three students prayed in varying amounts, they all seemed to keep themselves accountable for their own spiritual sustenance.

The second common theme among the students I found were the behavior of their parents. The students' parents were devout followers of Hinduism; all had a shrine in their household. The parents would encourage their children to attend every single week. However, one of the students, who attended Christian churches for two years, was treated leniently in terms of attendance by her parents. Since she was uninterested when she was younger and as she became busier with extracurricular activities, she and her sister asked their parents to allow them to stop going to temple. Considering this, it seems as though the stricter the parents are with attendance as the students were younger, the more likely they are to stick with their spiritual roots. However, all three students revealed that their parents would not necessarily get angry if they were to convert, they would simply be curious as to why they did.

The reason why the one student went to a Christian church for some time was because she was encouraged to try new things. Also, her boyfriend during her high school and college years was a Lutheran, which raised some curiosity for her. However, despite the fact that she thought of her boyfriend as a hypocrite and that they broke up, she still continued to go to a Christian church. The student revealed that she was very much involved with the church and that she liked the atmosphere of the church. The student had a falling out with the church due to the church's specific views on homosexuality. The student stated that she liked Hinduism's general way of life i.e. the golden rule.

To her, Hinduism's way of having generic, positive, moral teachings were attractive to her.

Now, the student is increasingly identifying herself with Hinduism more because of her new boyfriend who is teaching her many new things about the religion.

The students, however, did not agree on whether or not they've seen students falling away or growing closer to the religion. Two of the students explain that they have seen both, however, they both lean towards students growing more in touch with Hinduism. One student also said he has seen both, but leans toward the idea that more students are falling away.

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**EUI Links:** Exploring EUI Links  
September 19, 2007  
Research: Korean Americans Aesthetics and Style  
Researcher: Whitley, Anona

During the 2005-2006 school year, an undergraduate student researched first generation and second generation Korean American students at the University of Illinois and how they are distinct from each other, mainly through their style and fashion. However, it is important to note that each group's sense of style is predominantly due to the culture that they claim membership to. The researcher, Anona Whitley, interviewed many Korean students, in and out of her classes, asking them how they identify if someone is Korean or not or if they belong to the first or second generation just by looking at them.

The general consensus among those that were interviewed was that the Korean culture is very superficial. When teenagers would be attracted to one another, they would compare their target of affection with celebrities and models. Both males and females would strive to stay thin because that is perceived to be attractive in the Korean culture. Expensive clothing seems to be the most important trait that defines the perception of others. For example, Korean youth would most likely define someone to be popular or likable just by the cost of their clothes. Also, there seemed to be a very large social gap between first and second generation Korean students at the University of Illinois.

The first generation Korean students struggle because they do not integrate socially or culturally with other ethnic groups at the University of Illinois. This study is interesting because the researcher is not Korean, which contributes to the objectivity of the results. An interesting behavior found among some of the interviewed subjects was that they struggled with their ethnic identity. It is surprising to see the quantity of people struggling because personally, I, being a first generation Korean in the strictest sense, did not struggle very much with my own identity. It is also interesting to note how quickly people adapt to the American lifestyle and abandon their cultural origins.

EUI Links - November 8, 2007 One of the previous EUI research projects that is related to my research topic is "The Importance of Christianity and Christian Registered Student Organizations at Illinois State University". The student research was curious to see the trend as to why more and more people are going to church. Was the increased attendance due to more media coverage on religion, or was it because of recent events, such as 9/11 or other national tragedies? I have discovered that my research extends this project's finding in that religion can be seen as a social network. It would most likely be wrong and also very offensive to say that the only reason people attend church, synagogue, mosque, temple, etc. is to meet other people. I believe that when a member of any given religion is able to sustain his own faith by himself or through a congregation, then one of the bigger incentives to partake in a larger body of worship is for social networking. I believe in a religious point of view, social networking is not simply reduced to getting to know more people, but rather it is a means of supporting one another and keeping one another accountable.

**Reflect:** 12/2/07

Overall, my experience with conducting an EUI research project was positive. Although, I am not quite satisfied with the amount of data I collected. I wish I could have conducted more interviews, however, the interviews themselves were very enlightening and enjoyable. While I

did learn new things and common themes in my research, I know I am simply scratching the surface concerning the information yet to be discovered.

The process of researching my topic was very new to me. In the past, my research projects were usually done by collecting information through mediums such as credible websites or magazines. It was uncomfortable finding people to interview and the interviews themselves reached awkward points, however, that may just be a result of me stepping out of my comfort zones. Therefore, on a whole, it was a good experience and the research process taught me very practical things, even everyday things such as knowing how to carry on a conversation. The only possible thing I could criticize is that I would have liked to have more time to conduct interviews.

The course was helpful by assigning readings that supplemented my research. There were readings that pertained to religion on campuses, the social networking of Asian-American students, and the definition of youth that put things into perspective. However, it would have helped if there were articles directly related to Hindu college students. But, all in all, the readings were still very helpful.

The recording process made things easier because it helped organized my past data in a way that paper and pencil could not do. I liked the fact that the assignments were sporadic over the semester and that it could be done online whenever. Also, the process of interviewing was also a positive experience for me. However, I wished that I could have had the same in-depth experience of an interview and the mass response of surveys in a more accessible method. The only reason for this would be to maximize credibility and evidence for any conclusions that I could base on data. I also found it helpful to search through past research projects done by students on various campuses. The archived projects became a very useful tool in discovering what was already said and done and creating support for my findings. The only criticism I could find is that there was a very limited amount of research in the past available and relevant to my project.

**Recommendations:** This research project is not geared to make any recommendations concerning any one religion, but is relevant to the entire religious student body.

It is likely that most students coming to the U of I as freshmen feel apprehensive and that it can be overwhelming at times. Students coming from instate may have a more solid social network prior to their arrival at college, but even those from instate can feel a loss of identity. There are many groups already formed and cliques of friends that may

act exclusive to others. Religion and social networking are not two disconnected concepts. Rather, religion can be completely synonymous to a social network in the minds of students.

Most of the students interviewed revealed that they attend(ed) some sort of religious gathering at college. Many of their religious affiliations will provide social events and even a group of friends that they will come to familiarize themselves with. Knowing this, I believe the University of Illinois should help students that are *already* rooted in a religion to find a group that is identical or very much similar to their own. To avoid any legal issues, it would be wise to avoid supporting conversion from one religion to another or atheism to theism of any kind.

Quad day is a helpful way of getting the word out of religious groups, but quad day itself is very overwhelming as swarms of people can make anyone feel simply like another face in the crowd. I believe, the University should find more personal ways of raising awareness of various groups whether it be via e-mail, personal invitation by staff (e.g. RAs or RDs), or a mass conference that is encouraged for students to attend (e.g. freshmen orientation, ACE it).